

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, He sent the Holy Spirit to His disciples in Jerusalem at the festival of Pentecost. When Peter preached about Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection that day, three thousand believers were added to the Christian Church through the waters of Baptism. From that point on, Acts records the rapid growth of the New Testament Church through the preaching of Peter and the other apostles, including Paul, a former Pharisee who at first opposed Christ but was converted by Jesus on his way to Damascus. The second half of Acts records three missionary journeys that Paul and his companions undertook to share the Gospel.

While on his second journey, the Holy Spirit sent Paul and his missionary team to Macedonia. This was the first recorded preaching of the Gospel in the continent of Europe. We read in Acts 16:11–12: “So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.”

Philippi was first conquered by Caesar Augustus in 42 BC. He established it as a Roman colony and gave the city a special status equal to the Roman cities in Italy. It was populated with retired Roman soldiers, and only a few Jews lived there. It was a very different city from those Paul and his team had visited before then. Whenever Paul entered a city in Asia Minor, he always found a Jewish synagogue and started preaching the Gospel to the Jews in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He first witnessed to Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism because they would be familiar with many of the Old Testament prophecies about the Christ and Paul could show how well they fit Jesus of Nazareth. But the city of Philippi had too few Jewish men to even form a synagogue.

So Paul went to a place he assumed he could possibly find some Jews in Philippi. In the absence of a synagogue, Jews liked to gather beside rivers to pray. This brings us to our first mention of water today, from verses 13–14: “And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”

Here, alongside a river, we first meet Lydia. This brief introduction is very enlightening. Her home city of Thyatira was in Asia Minor, the area north of Israel where Paul had traveled with Barnabas in his first missionary journey.

Thyatira was a place where purple dye was manufactured. Purple was a rare dye in that day, extremely difficult to acquire and very expensive. Lydia had relocated to Philippi where she made a good profit trading purple products.

Luke adds another detail; Lydia was a worshiper of God. That is, a worshiper of the God of Israel. Paul found someone who already believed in the God of the Old Testament and taught her about Jesus, the Messiah prophesied throughout the Old Testament.

Finally, Luke tells us that God opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul said, and working through His mighty Word, the Holy Spirit created faith in Lydia. Luke doesn't tell us exactly what Paul said to the women, but we know it well enough: God promised to send His Son to Adam and Eve after they disobeyed Him and plunged our world into sin. All through the Old Testament, Jesus' coming had been prophesied, and God's people even heard much of how He would win that salvation.

Their offerings reminded them that a sacrifice must die for their sins in their place so that they might live. Jesus came and fulfilled that promise by taking our sins and guilt upon Himself and going to the cross. There, He suffered God's wrath and punishment for all of our sins. He died, was buried, and rose again on the third day, assuring us that death had been conquered and those who believe in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit will be forgiven and live with Him forever. Lydia was one of those women by the river who listened intently to Paul's message and were given the gift of faith.

Luke continues his recollection of this event with another mention of water in verse 15: "And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' And she prevailed upon us."

Lydia was successful and likely influential in Philippi. She was the head of her household, which would have included servants and any children she had. After being baptized along with her family, it is likely her house became the meeting place of the believers in Philippi, the city's first church building.

Lydia is mentioned only one other place in the New Testament, later in this chapter after Paul encountered some difficulty as his preaching in Philippi continued. For quite a while, he was followed by a demon-possessed slave girl who made a lot of money for her owners by telling fortunes. She kept crying out, drawing attention to Paul and his companions. Finally, Paul drove out the demon, and the owners, knowing they had lost their fortunes, dragged Paul and Silas, his partner, before the Philippian magistrates, who beat them with rods and then imprisoned them.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God in the prison. The prisoners were listening closely to them. Then suddenly an earthquake struck. The foundation of the prison was shaken, and the doors swung open. The jailer, thinking the prisoners had escaped, drew out his sword to kill himself.

Now why would he think about doing something so rash? According to Roman law, if a soldier or guard lost a prisoner, they would either kill themselves or be killed.

You may wonder what happened to the guards on Easter morning who went to the Jewish religious authorities to report that Jesus' grave was empty. Assuming they were Roman soldiers, Pilate would have killed them. But the Jewish leaders had another idea. We read in Matthew 28, verses 11–15: "While [the women] were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, 'Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."

The Jewish leaders were willing to pay bribes to Pilate to keep the guards from being executed. They needed the guards to establish their foolish story that Jesus had not risen, that His body had been stolen.

But there would be no bribe for this Philippian jailor. He was about to kill himself because the Roman sentence for a jailer or soldier who allowed a prisoner to escape was death and confiscation of the jailer's property. To protect their families, many Roman soldiers killed themselves before trial so their families could keep their property. Paul and Silas were aware of this and shouted to the jailor not to harm himself, assuring him all the prisoners were still there. When he rushed in and found it as Paul and Silas said, he fell down trembling in fear and asked what he must do to be saved. Paul told him to believe in the Lord Jesus and he would be saved. The jailer brought Paul and Silas to his home, cleaned their wounds, and he and his household were baptized—again the water.

The next day, the jailer received news from the town magistrates that Paul and Silas were free to go. But Paul demanded a public apology because it was unlawful to beat Roman citizens the way they had beaten Paul and Silas. The magistrates were deeply afraid. They apologized, brought them out of the jail, and asked them to leave the city. And here, in verse 40, we see our last glimpse

of Lydia in the New Testament: “So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.”

Isn't that interesting? Paul met Lydia on the shores of a river, and she turned out to be a pivotal person in the forming of the church in Philippi, a church to which Paul would later write one of his most encouraging apostolic letters.

So where does water come in for Lydia, for the jailer, and for each of us? The waters of Holy Baptism, where we are all adopted into the same family, brothers and sisters of Lydia, the jailer, Paul, Peter, and Jesus Christ Himself; sons and daughters of our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ.

In Baptism's water empowered by God's Word, each of us is covered in Jesus' grace, washed clean of our sins, and filled with the living water of God's Holy Spirit. And now we enter into Jesus' Great Commission from Matthew 28:19–20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” There again, we see the waters of Holy Baptism as we make disciples by baptizing and teaching.

As we close out this sermon series on water, I'd like to turn to one last passage about it. We are reminded that through Baptism, we all have the living water that sinners need. And we share that living water with thirsty, parched sinners when we share the Good News of Jesus' salvation with them.

And that gives us one more passage that uses water to teach us about how God's Word works when we share it. From Isaiah 55, verses 10–11, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

God has sent us out into the world with His Holy Word and the waters of Holy Baptism. God bless our efforts and cover all the children of Adam and Eve with Jesus' grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.